

**By Thai Phi Le**

**Mental Health Community Court Celebrates Five-Year Anniversary**

In 2007 the Mental Health Community Court (MHCC) of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia was created to address the needs of mentally ill offenders charged with low-level crimes. Five years later, success stories came pouring out as the court celebrated its anniversary at a ceremony held on June 21 at the H. Carl Moultrie Courthouse.

There was the 2012 graduate of the mental health program who said it helped him meet his first goal and accomplish his first real success. There was also the 57-year-old who was 90 days clean and sober for the first time after 43 years of dependency.

“To see individuals absolutely turn around their lives—folks who are homeless, living in the most desperate of circumstances, and then, as a result of coming into the court and the assistance of the Pretrial Services Agency, are connected to mental health services and are ready, and provided drug treatment and finally feeling better . . . it’s a blessing to be able to witness that,” said Linda Davis, who was presiding judge of the MHCC until her retirement on June 30.

MHCC was developed with the primary goal of reducing crime in the community while helping defendants get connected to treatment that could restore their health and cut down recidivism. For those who complete the program and meet the court’s conditions, the criminal charges may potentially be dismissed or reduced. Participation is voluntary.

“The [MHCC] is about life-affirming action designed to change the course of the revolving door,” said Judge Russell Canan, presiding judge of the Criminal Division of the D.C. Superior Court. “I want to thank the participants for having the courage and perseverance to enter this court and strive to do your best.”

Over the past five years, the program has received support and partnership from numerous organizations, including the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia, the D.C. Department of Health, the Pretrial Services Agency for the District of Columbia, and the Superior Court Trial Lawyers Association. “The traditional criminal justice system is not well equipped to confront the issues facing these offenders. Some people with mental health illnesses cycle through the system over and over again, oftentimes with very low-level offenses, without being connected to needed mental health and other services,” said Ronald Machen, the District’s U.S. Attorney. “As prosecutors, we are trusted with protecting the public. We cannot achieve our goal without making sure that we address the mental health needs of offenders.”